Making the Trip From the Vine to the Shelf
By TAMMY LA GORCE
ROCKY HILL, N.J. — First Field ketchup is found at barbecues where “the burgers are Kobe beef,” according to Theresa Viggiano, a founder of the company with her husband, Patrick Leger. When the couple were testing recipes as the company was getting started in 2008, however, the ketchup was more likely to be in their relatives’ refrigerators.

“We’d give it to family members, and they’d say: ‘That was nice. I used it in my meatloaf,’ ” said Ms. Viggiano, 36, of Griggstown.

Nowadays, the ketchup, which sells for $6.95 to $9 for an eight-ounce bottle, is in dozens of Whole Foods and specialty stores.

But one thing has stayed constant since the meatloaf days, and that is First Field’s main ingredient: tomatoes exclusively from New Jersey. First Field is one of a number of companies that make canned or jarred products using what is arguably the state’s most famous crop. On its label, the words “Jersey Ketchup” appear right below “First Field.”

“We decided that showcasing New Jersey on the label brings an authenticity to it,” Ms. Viggiano said during a recent interview at the company’s small, tidy test kitchen in an office park here. “It’s surprising how many people have this memory of buying a tomato from a farm stand in New Jersey.”

The ketchup is no longer produced in Rocky Hill because the couple cannot make enough of it in their limited space; since late 2010, batches of First Field have been made at the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton, a larger space. (The owners declined to say how much they produced each year.) But Ms. Viggiano and Mr. Leger maintain the test kitchen to tinker with new recipes.

Scott Stark, co-founder of the company that makes Two Guys Jersey Tomato Sauce, which is based in Bergenfield, similarly decided to tap into the lore of the New Jersey tomato when he and his partner and college friend, David Stoff, 33, of Fort Lee, began making their product in 2010. The company estimates it will sell “upwards of 30,000 cases” of 12 jars each this year, according to Mr. Stark, in 1,000 stores as far south as Virginia. Like First Field, it uses canned New Jersey tomatoes when fresh tomatoes are not in season.

“The tomato is the best thing that could have happened to New Jersey,” said Mr. Stark, 33, who lives in Manhattan. “People know it and love it.”

First Field and Two Guys are among nine companies making tomato products that are licensed to use the “Made With Jersey Fresh” logo on their labels, according to Lynne Richmond, a spokeswoman for the
New Jersey State Department of Agriculture. Producers of tomato sauce include Jersey Naturals of Little Egg Harbor, which makes the Mia Cucina brand, and IAM International of Lebanon, which makes Ethnic Cottage products.

To qualify for Jersey Fresh labeling, a product must be made with 100 percent tomatoes from a grower licensed by the department’s Jersey Fresh Quality Grading Program, Ms. Richmond said.

Besides those officially designated products, smaller-scale makers of New Jersey tomato products abound at local farm stands and farmers’ markets. Among them are Marc and Holly Phillips, co-owners of the 200-acre Phillips Farms in Milford, who make tomato sauce, ketchup, chili sauce, tomato butter and two varieties of salsa from their tomatoes and sell them at their on-site farm store, as well as at farmers’ markets in New Jersey and Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. (All are $5.50 a jar.)

Mr. Phillips, 48, grows 100,000 pounds of tomatoes and estimates that he sells 95 percent of them fresh at retail. Still, he said, “there’s a big demand” for the other products.

Two Guys buys all its tomatoes in New Jersey, including from a “low-key family farm in Swedesboro,” Mr. Stark said, but the fruit eventually ends up at a processing center in Farmingdale, N.Y., on Long Island, where Two Guys’ sauce is produced using a “co-packer,” a company that cooks it using Two Guys’ recipe. Its 25-ounce jars, which sell for $3.99 to $6.99, can be found in Whole Foods, Fairway, ShopRite and Stop and Shop.

At First Field, Ms. Viggiano and Mr. Leger grow about 10 percent of their own tomatoes on a two-acre farm they tend in Kingston, and they also source from Katona Farms Inc. in Chesterfield. They have avoided signing on with a co-packer because, Mr. Leger said, “we work with fresh fruit, and that means a lot of variability.”

Both First Field and Two Guys supplement their tomato-buying when necessary, turning to B & G Foods, a company based in Parsippany that packs tomatoes grown in Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem Counties. According to Marvin Schwinder, B & G’s marketing director, about a dozen farms account for the tomatoes that land in the company’s Williamstown packing center each summer. B & G processes 30,000 to 40,000 tons of New Jersey tomatoes each year, Mr. Schwinder said.

B & G’s own canned, crushed tomatoes are available in stores under the generic-sounding name Jersey Fresh Crushed Tomatoes. (Outlets include Kings supermarkets; a 28-ounce can costs about $1.99.) The company also packs the canned, crushed tomatoes sold by Colavita U.S.A., the company based in Edison and known nationally for its Italian imports, especially extra-virgin olive oil.

Colavita added the tomatoes to its product line four years ago, according to its chairman emeritus and founder, John J. Profaci Sr., 75, of Westfield. They are sold at Kings and ShopRite for about $1.99 for a 28-ounce can.

“Tomatoes are a natural line extension for us,” he said. “There’s a trinity in our industry: olive oil, pasta and tomatoes.”
Mr. Profaci, who said he had been in the food business for more than half a century, added: “There is no tomato in this country or in Italy that’s as good as the New Jersey tomato. Some of the characteristics might be good, but there’s nothing that can match it overall.”